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ABSTRACT

It has been found at the University of Oklahoma, where from 40 to 45 different native American tribal groups are represented, that even with considerable attention to the needs of such students they have poor chances of accomplishing their educational goals or of viewing as positive their university experience. The crosstribal value of interpersonal harmony, manifesting itself as the avoidance of verbal conflict, appears in the classroom as the avoidance of discussion participation, the avoidance of or refusal to answer direct questions calling for judgments and opinions, and the failure to ask questions. These behaviors contrast directly with those valued in the classroom and are compounded by the native American student's reticence to seek help outside the family or cultural unit. A threefold strategy respecting such students' decision-making ability include the following: informing such students of their options and the cost of these options, the creation of safe environments for students to acquire behaviors appropriate to such options, and the promotion of greater faculty awareness to preclude inappropriate judgment. (DF)

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COMMUNICATIVE RETICENCE: NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

A Paper Presented at the Convention of the
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by

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COMMUNICATIVE RETICENCE: NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

Education has often been viewed as a panacea for minority adjustment to the dominant American culture. Educational parity of minority groups is an obvious and tempting solution to contemporary cross-cultural problems. It still remains, however, a source of frustration to such advocates that education has not succeeded in bringing about the full participation of minority groups in the benefits of American society. The American Indian, as a minority citizen, is a notable example of educational failure. The Native American is perhaps the most tempting prospect because of the sentimentality, romanticism and guilt that many Americans feel in relationship to Native American cultures. These are distinct cultural groups which provide the colorful and quaint examples of cultural diversity which bolster the pride of those who wish to promote American ideals, such as tolerance for cultural diversity. Thus, there exists a schizophrenic approach on the part of the dominant culture. One the one hand, Indian cultures are viewed as unique cultures which not only should survive, but should somehow be nurtured by the dominant society. Conversely, there is tremendous pressure placed upon those cultures to conform to American cultural ideals. Indian individuals are subjected to the greatest pressure to change by the American educational institution. This potential social disintegration is reflected by the Native American's lack of participation in the good American life despite the endorsement and promotion of education. Even with the social promotion of education by both Indian and non-Indian,

something is obviously going wrong What that something is, has not yet been clarified. But if education is to provide a viable bridge between two cultures, educators must step outside the presumptions of both past and present generations and devise a perspective which frees education from its culture specific biases.

The University of Oklahoma campus provide ample opportunity to observe the dynamics of the minority student striving to make his place in the college community. At the University of Oklahoma, the Native American population represents 40-45 different tribal groups. Native Americans represent a significant minority on the campus and considerable attention is given to the welfare and development of the Indian as a student. The fact remains, however, that only a small percentage of Indian students accomplish their educational goals or even achieve a positive college experience. A recent survey showed that the drop out rate for Indian men and women now stands at 63%.[1] For Indian women that rate is even higher at 78%.[2] The same survey indicates that Indian men and women accumulate significantly lower grade point averages than non-Indian students. (37% accumulate grade point averages 2.00). There is some agreement among educators in institutions with high Native American enrollment that these significant figures are common in contemporary America.[3] We see too, that the percentage of Native Americans who complete a college degree is extremely low compared to the number who enter college. The attrition rate is extremely high, most Native Americans do not complete the first two years.[4] Few Native American students attend school systems that adequately prepare them for college. This is, of course, the situation

of non-Indians also. Still, with this more or less even start, Indians rapidly fall behind their non-Indian counterparts.

Such statistics are symptomatic of a set of underlying problems which present a direct challenge to professional educators. Before viable solutions are reached, causal factors must be identified and isolated. From this perspective, classroom experience with Native American and other minority students suggests that some of the most basic causes of negative educational experience are rooted in the fact of differing sets of communication patterns and interaction norms. These differences in communication expectations are representative of the basic value systems of each student. Because values vary from group to group, the variety of tribal organizations represent an even greater complication of the problem. These statistics and indicators are enough to incite even the most complacent educator into action.

We must examine the problem at the final intersection of American education and Native American students, the college classroom. The problem is s of course compounded by the fact that the college classroom represents the terminal point of the long educational process. The college classroom, on the other hand, is an excellent place to begin an examination of Native American reaction to the classroom because it is the terminal point. That is for many Native Americans it is their final unsuccessful confrontation with the American educational system.

The statistics indicate that the broad range of tribal identities represented at the University of Oklahoma are all similarly affected. Thus, it is helpful to begin to identify those cultural values which seem to cross tribal lines. In this respect Anthropologist Fred Gearing is helpful. Gearing suggests that the central value of Cherokee social life, was and is

the value of harmony among men. Gearing points out that the avoidance of conflict center not on physical manifestations of disagreement or aggression but upon the avoidance of direct, face to face, conflict.

> "First, in the usual circumstances of everday life one must exercise foresights so as not to intrude. The harmony ethic is maintained by the recommendation that a good Cherokee must be a "quiet" man avoiding disharmonious situations. It is maintained by not giving offense, the unwillingness of the individual to thrust his ideas or personality in the limelight or to make decision for or to speak for others.
>
> Second, when contrary interests do not become apparent, a good man is expected "quietly to go his own way." One does not cease to pursue his own interests. But one takes care not directly to frustrate the action of others and thereby avoids a confrontation.
>
> Third, when direct conflict does inevitably occur, a good Cherokee, "withdraws from it physically if he can, emotionally if he can't." The individuals involved are considered to have acted wrongly. "Aggression of any sort (overtly hostile, competitive or self-assertive) is giving offense. A good Cherokee does not act with counter aggression." 5

Whether by the cultural compression created by confinement in Indian territory or because of an consistency in the very organization of tribal culture, this basic value seems apparent in the behavior of most Native American students in the college classroom. Through direct observation of 100 Native American students, the authors have identified several consistent behaviors which imply a functioning verbal conflict avoidance ethic. These include:

1. General non-participation in classroom discussion. This is accomplished through a number of means including self-imposed physical separation from other class members, and avoidance of direct eye contact with teachers.
2. The avoidance or refusal to answer direct questions which call for value judgements or personal opinions.

3. The failure to ask questions in class.

While these behaviors may be attributable to other factors, self reports by these same students, gathered by the authors, tend to support the verbal conflict hypothesis. Even the most successful of the Native American students, represented by good grade point averages, demonstrate a marked tendency to avoid classroom discussion and to avoid advocating a point of view. When asked to generate a list of reasons for the high drop out rate and the lack of class participation, Native American students most frequently mentioned feelings of "not belonging" socially and the feeling that "all they (non-Indians) do in those classes is argue anyway."

These kinds of behavior contrast directly with behaviors which are most valued in the American classroom. Typical results are the formation of negative and frequently premature judgements by teachers concerning the Native Americans attitude and academic potential. Further, teachers who approach Native American students about such problems typically do so in a direct, face to face, verbal manner which succeeds only in compounding the problem.

A secondary aspect of the conflict avoidance ethic is that Native American students are reticent to discuss problems with those outside the family or cultural unit. Thus they frequently fail to seek or accept help with academic problems. Studies by LaFromboise, Dauphinais and Rowe indicate that Native American students are significantly less likely than non-Indians to seek help from counselors and other University personnel.[6] The lack of visible Indian counselors and personnel also decreases the likelihood that a student will communicate their problems.

However, a serious and deep-seated philosophical question must arise when developing a instructional strategy to cope with even this identifiable

problem. The question arises not out of any superficial concerns for the sensibilities and psychological processes of Native American students, but inherently from the broader proposition of cultural diversity in relationship to the perception of non-productivity and dysfunction of all minority groups by the dominant culture. Specifically, in relation to Native Americans' there have emerged many strategies, by educational and governmental institutions, which have contained the implicit underlying assumption that what is wrong with the Indians is the fact that they are Indians. This translates into the kind of social engineering strategies that begin to identify "Indian" characteristics that are hindrances to "progress" or absorption of the dominant culture's values. This identification process then automatically generates the approach which seeks to somehow eradicate or alter these characteristics because of their supposed debilitating effects. This is yet another example of schizophrenic approach by the American society to Indian people who are encouraged to express their differences in ways that are really superficial, and represent only the external forms of cultural diversity (i.e. unique tribal dress, tribal music, tribal language, customs, etc.). In terms of the deeper and more significant manifestations of cultural diversity, such as world view or socialized behavior, however, the dominant society tends to view cultural diversity negatively and make such diversity eligible for "proper" manipulation.

The idea of manipulating Indian values, even in a context which has the avowed positive purpose of making the individual more successful in a classroom situation, is one that must be closely scrutinized. When asked, any Indian student is likely to be in favor of anything that will enable him to make better grades. However, the manipulator may be perplexed to find resist-

ance and hostility on the part of the consenting individual when strategies and actual measures instituted attack the underlying value system of the Indian student. Perhaps the alienated, urbane, modern individual can tolerate and even accept the notion that "you can never go home again" and that college is an institution which is supposed to change one into a different person. However, Indian students, for many reasons, are reluctant to exchange basic Indian values for an education that has the distinct potential of turning them into social outcasts in their tribal environment. It is therefore not surprising that there has been a basic rejection of educational attainment by Indian people. despite the fact that education has been identified as an urgent need for Native American survival. The problem of a perceived threat to identit is particularly frustrating because it was the same reason Indians rejected educational alternatives at the turn of the century.

A plan of action, then, must be formulated with these consideration in mind. Something must be done which is congnizant of the Native American student's perception of the educational process in itself. The result of inaction will be a continuation of the drop-out rate and a continued perplexity on the part of concerned educators. The strategies developed may seem lacking to those intent on fixed solutions. However, the problem is complex and may be beyond the reach of a conceptualization that is clean cut. The strategies suggested here, though modest, place a high priority on the ability of Indian students to come to their own decisions. Many have never really exercised their own decision-making ability because for many a college education may symbolize success in an alien culture. It may be a convenient means of receiving a stipend for a year or it may be expected behavior by parents, friends or counselors. In any event, little thought is given to conceptualizi

the college experience.

Conceptualization of a "college education" may also have to change for the educators themselves. Where early, naieve attempts to open the college experience to minority peoples were made by attempts at changing whole institutions, the suggested approach here is markedly different. What must happen is an increase of cultural sensitivity on the part of the individual instructor. In dealing with minority students, the instructor must be aware of his own assumptions about classroom performance and be ready to interpret the behavior of the student on a much broader range of possibility. Whether a culture general or a culture specific approach is taken, the result must be a more sensitive instructor.

Thus, the proposed strategy, derived from the classroom experience with Native Americans, is rather modest. It may, however, be the best that can presently be formulated. The specific strategy is threefold. First, Native American students need to be made aware that there are a number of options available to them and that each option selected has its clearly perceivable costs. Second, there should be attempts to create "safe" environments in which Native American students may begin to exercise and learn appropriate behavior that accompanies the various options. Third, there must be the faculty awareness, sensitive enough to preclude premature and inappropriate judgement.

Implementation of the first strategy is the most difficult. For many reasons even relatively successful Native American students never become aware, in a conscious manner, of the alternatives and their consequences. The problem can be represented by the polarities of being "Indian" and of being an assimilated student. If a person decides their Indianness will

be compromised, they need to be made aware that non-participation and reticence will negatively affect the instructor's perception of their performance, interest and knowledge. This negative persentation of self will culminate in lower grades and likely suspension by the college, likely costing the individual financial security, desired educational goals and a stilling of personal developments. This person may be quite popular with other Indian students, but may not last longer than a few semesters. Of course, the comfort and security of familial and tribal acceptance will be sustained. If the student chooses the other pole, and as completely as possible adopts the role and norms of successful Anglo students, they are likely to succeed educationally. Educational and professional goals are attainable as well as financial success and continued personal development. However, they will likely be rejected by other Native American students on campus and their own tribal people at home. The urge of the typical Native American individual to remain in a tribal or Indian environment should not be underestimated. There are compromises of degrees between the two polar options. The question, however will remain, "To what degree are they willing to give up a nick of tribal identification to gain educational and future success. Even compromises have costs. The suggestion will always remain that students learn the appropriate behavior of each situation (college classroom and Indian culture) and exercise the behaviors of the classroom when appropriate, while attempting to limit their behavior to classroom activities. This behavior of course does not represent an ideal because it is impossible to live a completely hygienic schizophrenic life. However, turning on and turning off classroom behavior may be the most acceptable alternatives between the polarities. The comforting thought is that the educator is not creating anything because these alternatives have been faced by many people and is not particular to Indians.

The second alternative of creating a safe environment is a consequence of the first strategy. Small classes which are predominately or entirely Native American have been organized. The attempt has been to encourage students to begin changing their normal classroom behavior, with the issue of socialized behavior cearly discussed. Students are encouraged to take issue with other students and the instructors. The instructors also initiated behavior among themselves which attempted to make obvious that argumentation need not be considered abusive or rude. This strategy has met with limited success. However, the effect on the behavior of several students indicates that this process is worth continuing. The provision of a more structured situation in classrooms this fall has eased the frustration and confusion of many of the students.

The third alternative involves the orientation of instructors to Native American classroom behavior and the instructor's own biases. In the long run it may be more significant to alter instructor perception than student behavior. If instructors know how Native American classroom behavior differs, then they can begin to integrate with the normal reasoning process that occurs. For instance, non-partipation by Indian students do not necessarily indicate disinterest or non-comprehension. These perceptions can, in fact, negatively affect the subjective grading process. Similarly, many Indian students withdraw from overt attempts to draw them into the discussion by feigning ignorance. This is done in order to avoid further classroom attention. As noted earlier, this behavior is detrimental to the student's classroom image, but Indian students often do not perceive the options to be available. Even the most sympathetic and sensitive instructor may encounter difficulty with approaches that are direct. It may be that on the instructor's part the most that can be asked for is a suspension of the normal classroom judgement process.

There exists no conceptual framework from which to address the problem of cross-cultural judgement. While this paper suggests nothing that aspires to the level of "answers," it offers functional alternatives to traditionally institutional approaches to the cross-cultural classroom. The interplay between American society and the Indian cultures has grown subtle. The unique needs of contemporary Native Americans demand that "caution" must be the watch word in educating their children. Yet that education, it is realized, is the key to tribal survival. The paradox implied need not exist at the classroom level.

What is suggested is that any attempts at modifying Indian behavior must be considered very carefully, in the light of possible and actual value conflict created by cross-cultural circumstance. This paper is an attempt to provide an operational framework for a new perspective on the problem of Native American education. The moderate strategies suggested are consistent with this perspective. The approach is an attempt to avoid the irony of modern education, once again through rational attempts to help Indian students, implicitly re-stating that "the problem with Indians is that they are Indians."

FOOTNOTES

1
Myrna Carney, "Summary of Data Related to Attrition", Studies Conducted by the Office of Research for the University Community, p.1

2
Ibid, p. 2

3
Panel Discussion: "Post Secondary Education Workshop", National Indian Education, 10th. Annual Convention, Niagara Falls, New York, 1978

4
Myrna Carney, "Summary of Data Related to Attrition", Studies Conducted by the Office of Research for the University Community, p. 3

5
Frederick O. Gearning, Priests and Warriors: Social Structures for Cherokee Politics in the Eighteenth Century, Menosha, Wisconsin, American Anthropological Association, 1962, p. 30

6
LaFromboise, Dauphinais, Rowe, "A Survey of Indian Students' Perceptions of the Counseling Experience", Presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Canada; March, 1978.